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Our most important industry

The reports about the declining number of farms and the declining percentage of the population engaged in producing food, frequently repeated over the past years, might suggest that agriculture's importance is declining also.

Some facts and figures from 1976 reports about today's agriculture will counteract that notion and will serve to emphasize agriculture's continued and central importance to the health and vitality of our economy.

As the just-published Yearbook of the U.S. Department of Agriculture points out, "Farming is the nation's biggest business. The operators of the 2.8 million farms, their family labor, and hired help make up 4.4 million farmworkers—more workers than in the transportation, steel, and automobile industries combined."

According to the 1976 *Fact Book of U.S. Agriculture*, also published by the USDA, the total number of people working in some phase of agriculture ranges between 14 and 17 million. In addition to the 4.4 million engaged in farming itself, another 8 to 10 million are required to transport, process, store, merchandise, and otherwise deal with farm output as it moves between the farm and the dinner table. An additional 2 million are engaged in providing the fertilizers, seeds, and other supplies the farmer needs for production and family living.

Our agricultural enterprise produces enough food to make us better fed for less of our income than any other people in the world. It produces enough to make the United States the world's leading agricultural exporter. In 1975 we exported almost \$22 billion in agricultural products, which generated well over a million jobs, many billions in added business activity, and created a trade balance enabling us to buy much-needed petroleum, minerals, and consumer products vital to the standard of living enjoyed by the American consumer.

A few of California's farm production and income

figures will indicate why agriculture is a major factor in our own state's economic well-being. California's farmers produced more than 50 million tons of harvested crops in 1975, and total cash farm income for crop and livestock products approached \$9 billion. Fresno County alone, California's and the nation's leading county in cash crop income, established a new income record of well over a billion dollars in 1975.

The state's agricultural products can be found in the marketplaces of the world, and our exports include three-fifths of U.S. exports of fruits and nuts, a fourth of the vegetables, a fifth of the rice, and a tenth of the cotton. The California Crop and Livestock Reporting Service estimates agriculture's impact on the state's economy at over \$40 billion in receipts. That figure includes the \$8 billion plus in farm receipts and the tremendous additional processing, transportation, and marketing industries required to move that amount of farm commodities to the consumer.

As food supply is recognized as an important asset, both nationally and internationally, there seems to be less understanding of what makes us a leading producer of food. As the public and its governmental representatives become more urban-oriented, there is grave danger that policy decisions on problems of land use, labor, water, and the environment will be made without adequate consideration of the needs of this major, essential industry. Decisions on these kinds of problems, with serious implications for agriculture, are not made in the marketplace—on purely economic grounds. They are affected by emotions, pressures, and misinformation, as well as by awareness and understanding. It is important for all of us in the agricultural community to find ways to increase public awareness and understanding of agriculture and what it means to the good life for everyone.